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FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6029  
INFO RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN PRIORITY 0380  
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 0087  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 7068  
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 5157  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 3729  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0943  
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RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 5335  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 2019  
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RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY  
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORPORATION PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 COLOMBO 000698

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS  
MCC FOR D NASSIRY AND E BURKE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/12/2017  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)  
SUBJECT: PRESIDENT RELIES ON BROTHERS FOR POLICY ADVICE AND  
POLITICAL COVER

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: President Rajapaksa relies on his brothers, Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa and Senior Advisor to the President Basil Rajapaksa, for advice on security matters and political affairs respectively. Fear that Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) stalwarts are disloyal has caused the President to lean more heavily on his brothers than on party insiders for support and advice. The President tends to postpone decisions and at times avoids decisionmaking, as well as potential blame for unpopular decisions, by delegating many responsibilities to his brothers. Basil and Gothabaya, however, do not always get along. Many have remarked that they rarely appear in public together, seem never to attend the same meetings, and at times offer the President conflicting advice. Nonetheless, the President's brothers play an important and influential role in shaping Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) security and political policy and provide important political cover to the President. The fact that Sri Lanka has one of the largest Cabinets of Ministers in the world, 53, perversely has contributed to the centralization of power in the Rajapaksas' hands because many ministers have overlapping or undefined responsibilities. Successive constitutional changes over the last three decades have concentrated a progressively larger share of power in the President's hands. Moreover, the constitutional changes that his SLFP put forward in its "devolution" proposal would, rather than decentralizing power, actually tend to increase the President's prerogatives. Thus far, Mahinda Rajapaksa has failed to use his power to advance key national interests such as the need to develop a national consensus on a devolution proposal that could form the basis for renewed peace negotiations. End Summary.

Brothers Offer Advice on Security and Politics  
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2. (C) President Rajapaksa relies on his brothers, Defense

Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa and Senior Advisor to the

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President Basil Rajapaksa, for advice on security matters and political affairs respectively. Although he trusts them both, our contacts say the President has more respect for Gothabaya than for Basil. An embassy contact told Pol Off that the President is insecure in his job because he knows that Sri Lanka, as a "semi-feudal" society, still has great respect for aristocracy. He fears that because he is not from an elite family, but rather from a village in the deep south, support for him within the SLFP is a thin veneer that will last only as long as he is in power. This perception of disloyalty within the SLFP has caused him to rely even more heavily on his brothers for support and advice. Many Embassy contacts from both the ruling and opposition parties have expressed frustration with the level of influence Basil and Gothabaya have on policy.

13. (C) The President is often reluctant to make decisions and will stall for time, particularly on important issues. Sometimes he avoids decisionmaking altogether by delegating many responsibilities to Gothabaya or Basil, allowing him to avoid blame for unpopular decisions. The most notable example of the President's stalling tactics is the slow progress of the All Parties Representative Committee (APRC) process and the delay in the submission of the SLFP devolution proposals to the APRC.

14. (C) According to Embassy contacts, the President, who holds the portfolio of Defense Minister, makes all defense and security decisions in consultation with Gothabaya. One Embassy contact told Pol FSN that the President "would not change even a roadside checkpoint" without first consulting Gothabaya. Gothabaya has nearly full autonomy on military

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decisions. He and Army Commander Fonseka have a close relationship and work well together; Fonseka was one of Gothabaya's commanding officers when he was in the Army. The other military commanders follow Gothabaya's instructions faithfully for fear of being replaced. Key presidential decisions that reflect Gothabaya's influence include appointing Sarath Fonseka as Army Commander, closing the A-9 highway to Jaffna, and appointing Victor Perera as the Inspector General of Police.

15. (C) The President consults Basil on most political matters. Basil's influence can be seen in the alleged deal with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam to suppress Tamil votes in the North and East in the November 2005 Presidential election and the January 2007 Cabinet reshuffle and luring of "crossover" opposition members of Parliament. According to Embassy contacts, Basil advises the President on an array of topics despite his limited education and lack of relevant work experience (see paragraph 12).

16. (C) The President's brothers have few advisors of their own. Gothabaya occasionally consults some of his army colleagues who have retired. Embassy contacts say Basil has no close advisors and more enemies than friends in Sri Lanka because he makes a habit of trying to "buy people."

Discord Between the Brothers

17. (C) Basil and Gothabaya appear not to get along very well. Many have remarked that they rarely appear in public together, seem never to attend the same meetings, and at times offer the President conflicting advice. For example, when the GSL was reviewing bids for construction of a proposed new port in Hambantota, Basil and Gothabaya endorsed different Chinese companies. In the end, the President had to split the work between the two companies to appease his brothers. Basil and Gothabaya also disagreed on whether the government should accept the United National Party (UNP)

defectors in January 2007. Gothabaya preferred not to take them into the government and to work more closely with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Basil wanted the crossovers to shore up the ruling party's position in parliament, thereby negating the need to depend on the JVP for a majority. Their biggest area of disagreement is quite possibly the debate between a military or a political solution to the ethnic conflict. Gothabaya favors a military solution, while Basil evinces skepticism that a military solution is possible. Despite their different agendas, Basil often relies on Gothabaya to provide the necessary "muscle" to get things done.

#### Rajapaksa Trio Powerful, But Isolated

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18. (C) Ever since the 1978 Constitution transferred broad executive powers from the Prime Minister to the new Presidency, power has tended to gravitate toward the President. Although Rajapaksa's electoral campaign manifesto promised to abolish the executive presidency, the concentration of power in the Presidency has accelerated during the Rajapaksa administration. The recent cabinet reshuffle, which left Sri Lanka with one of the largest Cabinets of Ministers in the world, perversely has contributed to the centralization of power in the Rajapaksas' hands because many ministers have overlapping or undefined responsibilities. The resulting confusion has meant that most important issues are handled by the President and his advisors, not by the ministers. The President himself holds ministerial portfolios including Finance, Defense and Ports and Aviation. He thus directly supervises over a hundred government departments and administrations. Together with

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discretionary Presidential spending powers, he personally controls over 60 percent of the national budget. The President also has bypassed the 17th Amendment to the Constitution, which says the President should appoint the heads of key commissions and certain senior government officials on the recommendation of the Constitutional Council. His personal appointment of these officials calls into question their independence, and means there is little oversight of his decisionmaking. The constitutional changes that his SLFP put forward in its "devolution" proposal would, rather than decentralizing power, actually tend to increase the President's prerogatives. For example, he would appoint two-thirds of the new Senate's members under the SLFP draft.

19. (C) At the same time, the Rajapaksas are increasingly isolated. The President both fears and despises what he disparagingly refers to as the "Colombo 7 Crowd," Colombo's western-educated, wealthy elite (most of whom live in the 7th district of the city). He has not included them in his inner circle and is not in touch with their views. In addition, his brothers lived out of the country until just before the election in 2005. As a result, they have a limited understanding of the Sri Lankan public's concerns and few contacts within the country's elite. This isolation has meant that almost all important decisions are made by a small inner circle with limited exposure to input and ideas from the country's public or elite.

#### Background on the Family

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110. (C) President Rajapaksa comes from a large family. He has one elder brother, Chamal, four younger brothers, Chandra, Basil, Gothabaya, and Dudley, and two younger sisters, Gandhini and Preethi. Chamal is the current Minister of Irrigation and Water, but is not considered influential. Chandra is the Private Secretary to the Minister of Religious Affairs and Moral Upliftment and also at times acts as an advisor to the President. Dudley lives in Texas. An elder sister died a few years ago. Embassy contacts tell us that the Rajapaksa brothers grew up very

close and always confer within the family before seeking advice from others.

¶11. (C) Gothabaya was educated in Matara and Galle. He joined the Sri Lanka Army as a cadet officer and was a Lieutenant Colonel when he left the armed forces in 1985. Gothabaya's mother-in-law sponsored him and his family to migrate to the U.S., where he found employment as a software programmer. Gothabaya became a naturalized US citizen in ¶2003. He returned to Sri Lanka in 2005 to help with Mahinda Rajapaksa's election campaign.

¶12. (C) Basil was also educated in Matara and Galle. According to his school friends, he was expelled a couple of times from his college in Galle. He joined the SLFP at a young age and supported his brother Mahinda in 1970 when he contested the Beliatta electorate in the Hambantota District Parliamentary elections. In 1977, however, he joined the UNP and worked against his brother. Basil worked for the Ministry of Mahaweli Development, where he earned the nickname "Mr. Ten Percent" for demanding a ten percent commission on every project. Basil continues to be accused of significant corruption in his current position. Basil rejoined the SLFP for a few years, but then crossed back to the UNP in the 1990s. Former President Chandrika Kumaratunga refused to allow him to rejoin the SLFP during her tenure. He then moved to the U.S., but returned in 2005 to support Mahinda's bid for the Presidency.

¶13. (C) Embassy contacts say that the President's family is viewed in a positive light by the general public. The

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President's wife is seen as very "proper" and admired for having raised good, polite sons. The President's immediate family is a huge draw for the public and boosts his popularity, according to Embassy contacts.

¶14. (C) The President is related by marriage to UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe; Ranil's father's sister is married to the President's mother's first cousin. Our contacts say that the two used to get along well, but the relationship has turned sour since Wickremesinghe has been speaking out against the President, especially on human rights, when he travels abroad.

Another Dynasty?  
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¶15. (C) A presidential advisor told us that leaders like the President, who are not from the political elite, have two options. They can either be revolutionaries and try to destroy the aristocratic system, or they can join the system and try to create their own dynasty. The President has chosen to pursue his own dynasty. Namal, the President's eldest son, is often mentioned as a possible political successor to his father. A separate Embassy contact told Pol Off that the President is reluctant to call snap elections because he knows Namal wants to run for a seat in parliament. The President wants to delay any Parliamentary election at least until Namal finishes his studies in the United Kingdom.

¶16. (C) COMMENT: The relationship between the President and his brothers, obviously, is a family one as well as a political one. There is much that we don't know about how they interact. Nonetheless, it is clear that the President's brothers play an important and influential role in shaping GSL security and political policy. Moreover, one of their biggest roles is to provide political cover to the President. The President often has Gothabaya and Basil take credit for decisions so he can appear less involved in actions that earn the GSL criticism at home and abroad. The concentration of

power in the Presidency means that Mahinda Rajapaksa, with the help of his brothers, has a unique opportunity to advance key national interests. Thus far, he has failed to use that power to develop a national consensus on a devolution proposal that could form the basis for renewed peace negotiations.

BLAKE